

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM (2009)

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Microaggressions in the classroom committed against students representing a diversity of groups continues to be a challenge at the University of Denver. Students report that they are often subjected to microinsults and microinvalidations (see definitions below) by faculty (and other students) based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity, disability, age, socioeconomic status, and other diverse dimensions. Inappropriate jokes; malicious comments; singling-out students; setting exams and project due dates on religious holidays; and stereotyping are but a few examples of microaggressions that DU students continue to experience and report in the classroom. It is clear from the literature that microaggressions are often committed by well-intentioned, good people not meaning to hurt anyone. Nevertheless, the outcome of microaggressions is anger, frustration, and withdrawal by those who are the recipients of insensitive comments and actions. Thus, in the case of the classroom, microaggressions are not being committed by spiteful and bigoted professors who want to intentionally hurt students from diverse groups, but rather are undertaken at the unconscious level by well meaning and caring professors. The bottom line is that microaggressions result in hostile and unwelcoming classroom environments.

Given the above, this document was developed by the authors (three DU students and an administrator) to assist faculty, instructors, and teaching assistants in addressing and preventing microaggressions in the classroom. The information on this page emerged out of a student led workshop for faculty on the topic of microaggressions in the DU classroom that took place during the 2009 University of Denver's Annual Diversity Summit. It is important to note that although the focus of this document is on faculty microaggressions, it is also a fact that students are committing microaggressions against other students. Faculty must also be vigilant about those incidents.

Both students and faculty play a role and have a responsibility in creating safe and inclusive classroom environments. The following two sections contain information about the definitions and specific examples of microaggressions. The examples of microaggressions were generated from actual experiences of DU students. It is also important to recognize that microaggressions are not germane to social science classes. Many of these incidents have been reported from courses representing different colleges and departments throughout DU. The concluding section offers specific suggestions for faculty on how to prevent and address microaggressions. Instructors are not required to adopt the suggested guidelines. However, we hope that these will be helpful to those professors who would like to work toward building inclusive classrooms.

Definitions of Microaggressions

- *Microaggressions* are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,

derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group.” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000)

- *Microinsults* are behaviors, actions, or verbal remarks that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean a person’s group or social identity or heritage. (Sue, et. al. 2007)
- *Microinvalidations* are actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of people who represent different groups (Sue, et. al. 2007).

Microaggressions cut across all social identities including race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, disability status, socio-economic class, and other important social dimensions. At the University of Denver, these insults and invalidations also occur across all majors, departments, and colleges.

Examples of Microaggressions

- Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have corrected you time and time again.
“Is José Cuinantila here?”
“I am here; but my name is Jesús Quintanilla.”
- Scheduling tests and project due dates on religious or cultural holidays.
“It has just been pointed out to me that I scheduled the mid-term during Rosh HaShanah, but we are Ok because I don’t see any Jewish students in the class.”
Review DU’s religious accommodation policy at:
www.du.edu/studentlife/religiouslife/about-us/policy.html
- Setting low expectations for students from particular groups or high schools in Denver.
“Oh, so Robert, you’re from Montbello High School? You are going to need lots of academic help in my class!”
- Calling on and validating men and ignoring women students during class discussions.
“Let’s call on John again. He seems to have lots of great responses to some of these problems.”
- Using inappropriate humor in class that degrades students from different groups.
“Anyone want to hear a good ethnic joke? Ok, well there was a Jew, a Mexican, and a Black. The Mexican says to the...”
- Expressing racially charged political opinions in class assuming that the targets of those opinions do not exist in class.
“I think illegal aliens are criminals because they are breaking the law and need to be rounded up and sent back to Mexico.”
- Hosting debates in class that place students from groups who may represent the minority opinion in class in a difficult position.

"Today we are going to have a debate on immigration. I expect the three Latino students and a few of you to argue in favor of immigration. The rest of you will provide arguments against immigration."

- Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility and validity of their stories.
"I've eaten and shopped plenty of times in West Denver and it's nothing like you describe it. How long have you lived there and who are you hanging out with?"
- Assigning class projects that are heterosexist, sexist, racist, or promote other oppressions.
"For the class project, I want you to think about a romantic relationship that you have had with a member of the opposite sex. Think and write about your observations."
- Using heterosexist examples or sexist language in class.
"Atoms sometimes attract each other like this male and female here. At the same time, atoms sometimes repel each other like these two males here."
- Assigning projects that ignore differences in socioeconomic class status.
"For this class, you are required to visit four art galleries located in the downtown area. The entrance fees vary but I am sure you can afford it."
- Singling students out in class because of their backgrounds.
"You're Asian! Can you tell us what the Japanese think about our trade policies?"
- Assuming that all students are from the US and/or fully understand US cultural references (i.e., be aware that there may be international students in the class).
"What do you mean you have never heard of The Cosby Show? Where have you been hiding?"
- Discouraging students from working on projects that explore their own social identities.
"If you are Native American, I don't want you to write your paper on Native Americans. You already know everything about that group and besides you will be biased in your writing."
- Asking people with hidden disabilities to identify themselves in class.
"This is the last time that I am going to ask. Anybody with a disability who needs extra help, raise your hand!"
Visit the Disabilities Services Program at: www.du.edu/studentlife/disability
- Ignoring student-to-student microaggressions, even when the interaction is not course-related.
"Don't be retarded! That party this weekend was so gay."
- Making assumptions about students and their backgrounds:
 - Assuming that all Latino students speak Spanish.

"You're Latino and you don't speak Spanish? You should be ashamed of yourself!"

- Assuming that all Asians are good at math.
"I know who I'm calling on a lot to work some of the math problems in this class – Mr. Nguyen!"
- Assuming that all African Americans know about poverty and the "Ghetto."
"Mr. Summers! We just read about poverty among Blacks in America. Does this fit your experience and can you tell us about it?"
- Assuming that all Native Americans are knowledgeable about the 500 plus diverse tribes that exist in the U.S.
"Many Native American tribes are in favor of using casinos to increase revenues and many others are against it. Mr. Begay, as a Navajo what are your thoughts?"
- Assuming that all Jewish students are well versed in the Israeli –Palestinian conflict and history and that they all have the same opinions about that complex situation.
"Oh, you're Jewish! Can you tell us about what the Israelis think about Jewish settlements in the West Bank?"

- Assuming the gender of any student. Moreover, continuing to misuse pronouns even after a student, transgender or not, indicates their pronouns to you.
"I would like for Mike to share her stories related to her life as a young woman growing up in New York City."
- Assuming all students fit the traditional student profile and are proficient in the use of computers.
"All you millenials are on Facebook. I will post the evite for the class project on the site."
- Disregarding religious traditions or their details. For example, Ramadan involves fasting from sunrise to sundown, so pressuring observant students to attend a food-focused event is disrespectful.
"I am inviting you all over to my house for dinner after class next week to discuss your projects. Ali, I know its Ramadan, but hope you'll join us anyway."
- Forcing students with non-obvious disabilities to "out" themselves or discuss them publically.
"If anyone has a disability, raise your hand right now so that we can make special accommodations for you."

Suggestions to Faculty for Addressing Microaggressions in the Classroom

1. Do not expect students to be experts on any experiences beyond their own and do not make them speak for their entire group (or others). For example, just because a student is Latino does not mean that they have an academic background in the study of Latinos. The same can be said about African Americans, members of the GLBTIQ community, Jewish students, students with disabilities, etc.

2. Do not assume that the groups that you are talking about are not represented in the classroom. A professor who states “Illegal aliens are criminals because they have broken the law in coming to the US.” may be assuming that there are no undocumented students in the classroom. Moreover, they are not aware of how unsafe those students feel after hearing those comments. The same goes for making pejorative statements about people from different areas of the region, US, or the world (e.g., “People from Aurora, CO are on welfare and lazy,” “People from Boulder are left-wing nuts”).
3. Set high expectations for all students. For example: “You are all very bright and talented. I know that you will do well in my class. I have high expectations for every one of you.” In contrast, do not say: “Those of you from West High School will probably need a lot of help in my class.”
4. Do not assume that all students in your class have good command of the English language or have intimate knowledge of US culture. Many International students are not familiar with US slang words or other language idiosyncrasies. Often, many of these students are using electronic translators in class as you lecture and present information.
5. When you are studying and discussing in class different group identities or issues related to specific groups (immigration, same sex marriage, affirmative action), do not lock eyes with a student whom you think represents one of those groups. Your action assumes the identities and opinions of the students, potentially “outs” that student, and puts the individual on the spot. In addition, all the other students in your class will also notice what you are doing.
6. Work to create a safe environment for all identities in the classroom by establishing ground rules and expectations regarding discussions about and presentations on issues of diversity.
7. Debates are one technique that instructors often use in class to explore and get students engaged in issues. However, it is important to distinguish between debates and dialogues. Debates are about people discussing issues and competing to see who has the “best” response. They have the explicit assumption that someone will win and someone will lose. Dialogues, on the other hand, are about achieving greater levels of understanding by listening to each other as we delve deeper into issues. In the end, whichever technique you use, make sure that you establish ground rules and set the context for the activity.
8. If you are going to express your political opinions in the classroom, understand that there is a risk of silencing students who do not agree with your views. As a faculty member, when you express your views to students you are doing so out of a position of power. That is, students may be afraid to express themselves given that they know your position on an issue and that their grade maybe on the line. Similarly, be aware of how balanced you are in challenging student opinions that do or do not agree with your own.
9. If you are going to bring in guest speakers, make sure that your objectives are clear in bringing those individuals to class—clear to you, the class and the guest. If the reason is to introduce a particular perspective, try to balance the discussion by inviting different guest speakers with other perspectives.
10. It is ok to use humor in class. However, make sure that it is appropriate humor that does not target or degrade any student in the class or group of people overall. Classrooms are for engaging issues and learning concepts and new ideas; not having students, faculty or guests mock or denigrate people.

11. Be cognizant that microaggressions are also directed by students against other students. Be prepared to interrupt those incidents, too. Even if you are not sure how to address the climate issue in the moment, it is appropriate classroom management to stop problematic behavior immediately. You can follow up with individual students or the entire class later, after reflecting and/or consulting with colleagues on how best to do so.
12. In those cases where students do have the courage to contact you and point out that they were offended by a remark that you made or an action that you undertook, listen to them. As indicated above, given that you are in a position of power it probably took a lot of courage for them to raise the issue with you.
13. Know that there are resources at DU to support you in addressing microaggressions in the classroom.
 - **Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL):** <http://otl.du.edu/inclusive-excellence-and-our-teaching>
 - **Office of Diversity & Inclusion (ODI)** supports faculty and academic-related issues: www.du.edu/diversity-inclusion
 - **Inclusion & Equity education (IEE)** provides students with information, skills and opportunities for constructive engagement across difference; faculty and staff are welcome to participate in most workshops and events: www.du.edu/studentlife/ie-education

References:

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